

Commodore Edgar House  
29 Old Beach Road  
Newport  
Newport County  
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-318

HABS  
RI,  
3-NEWP,  
35-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

## COMMODORE WILLIAM EDGAR HOUSE

HABS  
RI,  
3-NEWP,  
35-

Location: 29 Old Beach Road.

Present Owner: Henry S. Howard (in the name of Rowe and Co.).

Present Occupants: Owner and other tenants.

Present Use: Residential.

Statement of  
Significance: This is an important residential design by McKim,  
Mead, and White, marking the beginning of a  
return to more academic principles of design  
for domestic architecture.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

## 1. Original and subsequent owners:

The building is located in Plat 26, Lot 26. The following is an incomplete chain of title from Newport City Clerk's Records for the city of Newport. Reference is to number and volume of the Land Evidence Books, (LEB.--, p.--).

1860 Deed of December 24, 1860, recorded in LEB. 35, p. 470.

From: Julia M. Peckham  
To: William Edgar  
For: \$14,000

"... bounded Northerly on Old Beach Road, there measuring one hundred sixty-seven feet, eight inches, Easterly on lands of Anna P. Grant, there measuring five hundred and sixty-one feet six inches, Southerly on lands of Daniel T. Swinburne, there measuring one hundred and sixty-four feet eight inches, and Westerly on the other lands of this grantor, and there measuring five hundred and sixty-one feet six inches... containing two acres of ground, with a dwelling house and other buildings thereon..."

1920 Deed of July 23, 1920, recorded in LEB. 109, p. 171.

From: William Edgar

To: Lucile R. Edgar, devisee

1947 Deed of September 25, 1947, recorded in LEB. 165, p. 232.

From: Lucile R. Edgar, by Conservator Aquidneck  
National Bank

To: Henry S. Howard

(See also LEB. 173, p. 536; 194, p. 95; 202, p. 253;  
211, p. 453; 222, pp. 555-57 for changes in the deed  
relating to Henry S. Howard's business arrangements.)

Maps of 1876 and 1883 show the earlier house on this  
site owned by William Edgar which was removed when  
the present building was erected in 1884-1885.

2. Date of erection: 1884-1885
3. Architect: McKim, Mead, and White
4. Builder: Nathan Barker
5. Original plans: Drawings and plans in the New York  
Historical Society.
6. Alterations and additions: The house has been divided  
into several apartments by the present owner.
7. Important old views and descriptions:
  - a. Old views: North facade photograph, p. 25, ground  
floor plan, p. 28, Sheldon, George William, ed.,  
Artistic Country Seats, Volume III, New York:  
Appleton and Co., 1886.
  - b. Description: Sheldon, George William, ed.,  
Artistic Country Seats, Volume III, pp. 25-28:

"Commodore William Edgar's House

Although disclosing some affinity with the  
colonial style, this house can scarcely be classed  
as colonial. It was finished in 1885, and the arch-  
itects are Messrs. McKim, Mead, and White. Built  
of a narrow, speckled, unpainted brick, of a buff color,  
somewhat like that of the Tiffany house, on Madison  
Avenue, New York, with shingled roof, brick chimneys,  
two stories and an attic, Commodore Edgar's house is  
one of the most recent and attractive private resi-  
dences at Newport. The porch is of wood, and some of

the trimmings are of light sandstone. The dimensions are: length, one hundred and seventeen feet; depth, sixty feet four inches. A grass terrace on the principal front---which is shown in our illustration---approaches the balustrade of light sandstone, and the central part of the principal facade is recessed, the main entrance being in the center of the recess, while at either side are two projections, one a round bay and the other an octagonal bay. We note also the recessed fountain, with its stone basin and canopy of stone, on the left of the octagonal bay. The situation is about two hundred feet from Beach Street, and one end of the house fronts on a lane. The grounds are principally in the rear, with trees and a highly cultivated lawn, but no view of the water from the first floor. On the end fronting the lane are the kitchen and servants' wing, with an entrance from the sidewalk, and, on the opposite end, a large circular bay of the drawing-room, and steps up to the piazza from the lawn. The piazza winds around the library, which opens upon it; immediately over the drawing-room bay is a loggia; and the rear or south side of the building has a long piazza-porch, and a small projection which forms part of the dining-room. On the roof is a deck, with a very light balustrade. Many dormers appear, and the very large drawing-room chimney, which shows its entire length. Either side of the main roof is a plank with a huge chimney-stack, each of which is perforated with an open arch. The cost of Commodore Edgar's house was about fifty thousand dollars.

By very wide, easy stone steps, we enter the porch, and the part of the terrace directly in front of the main entrance is paved with blue-stone. The porch is wide, and from it we enter the vestibule, four feet by eight, simply treated, the upper part of the door showing an arrangement of modern festoons and plate-glass. Thence we find ourselves in the main hall, twenty-seven feet by sixteen and a half, finished in oak, simply wainscoted, the walls covered with leather held by brass nails, the ceiling eleven feet high, with two large beams, supported on heavy carved brackets, dividing it into three sections filled in with smaller beams and decorated in color. The mantel is a copy of an old mediaeval design in stone, elaborately carved, having a pilaster at each side, and above it a frieze with a cornice, forming the shelf. The part of the chimney directly over the shelf projects more than the cornice-line, as so often is the

case in mediaeval mantels. The wide fire-opening, lined with brick, has an ornamental cast-iron back, and is to the right of the entrance from the vestibule. Directly opposite the entrance are the windows overlooking the lawn, the center one much the largest of the three, and the right-hand one used as a door.

The first opening in the hall to the right leads to the morning-room, eighteen feet by eighteen, including a circular bay-window, thirteen feet in diameter. Immediately beyond, on the other side of the fireplace, is the entrance to the library. The morning-room, in white and gold---that is, pine, painted white, with the ornamental work picked out in gold---has walls covered with stuffs to harmonize with the general treatment, and a ceiling tinted in keeping, and is connected by a lobby, seven feet eight by nine, with the drawing-room, twenty feet by twenty-eight, all treated en suite in white and gold, and forming an attractive series by themselves. One feature of the drawing-room is a bay-window, fourteen feet across its widest part, and four feet deep. We note also a painted ceiling of considerable importance, the tints being applied on the plaster, and the design being an elliptic treatment with leaves, while in the four corners appears a scheme of open lattice-work flowers and figures. The silk panels of the walls are lightly framed, and delicately carved up to about two feet below the ceiling, which is coved. The very ornate mantel consists of marble in the lower part, and in the upper part an elliptic mirror offers a treatment of festoons in wood around the ellipse, the whole inclosed in a handsomely carved and molded frame of wood.

The library, eighteen feet by sixteen, in cherry, with a bay-window four feet by eleven, has wall-surfaces occupied by book-cases which extend nine feet high, to a wooden cornice just below the cove of a ceiling painted a reddish brown, to harmonize with the cherry and the gold decoration. To the left of the entrance, the mantel---a richly carved frame around its fire-opening---shows a series of brackets, also richly carved, on which the shelf rests. The fire-opening and hearth are faced with red Verona marble, and, above the mantel-shelf, the space is entirely occupied by an arabesque carved panel, inclosed in an elaborately molded and carved frame. At either side of the fireplace proper are flat pilasters, fluted and carved, with ornamental caps, the line of the pilasters being carried up through

the cornice of the room, and making a break at the coved ceiling. Immediately below the cornice a legend is inscribed. All the window-spaces have wide and roomy seats. The book-shelves are open, without doors---you feel that you are in a library. The treatment of the bay is entirely in wood, with a domed ceiling of painted plaster, and the entrance between the library proper and the bay is through a wide opening.

Opening from the main hall, at the left, is a staircase-hall, eighteen feet by thirteen, with a bay, octagonal on the exterior, but elliptic inside, the staircase following the line of the ellipse. The treatment is very simple---plain base, molded chair-rail, and plaster cornice---and just under the cornice is a design of festoons in papier-mache. Especial attention is claimed by the balusters and newels, which are in brass, light and graceful, and by the rail, covered with brown plush that has a silken fringe, although the labor of keeping this brass shining is a matter of some consequence to a housekeeper. The glass ornament at the top of the principal newel has a history of its own.

Opposite the library is the dining-room, eighteen feet by twenty-eight, finished in a dark American oak, its entire surface covered with wood in both ceiling and wall. One end is wholly occupied by the fireplace and its adjoining cupboards, their lower parts treated with simple doors, brass hinges and door-plates, while the fireplace itself is wide---four feet six by three feet---and, immediately over it, a marble shelf is supported on marble brackets, the part of the brick-work above the shelf being recessed. All the cupboards have curved fronts, and are part of the scheme of the mantel; their doors are divided into small lights of a curious pattern. Directly opposite the fireplace is the dining-room window, looking out on the lawn; the whole side of the room is practically a window, ten feet wide, with the ceiling lower than that of the rest of the apartment, and with cupboards on either hand similar to those opposite. The wooden ceiling, antique, and imported from Europe, has a heavily paneled and richly carved surface. The other two sides of the room are paneled to the ceiling.

All the bedrooms in Commodore Edgar's house are colonial in treatment, some of them tinted, others in natural colors."

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

C. Sources of Information:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:  
Records of Deeds in the Newport City Hall.
2. Secondary and published sources:  
Downing, Antoinette F., and Scully, Vincent J. Jr., The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island, New York: Clarkson N. Potter, second edition, 1967.  
A Monograph of the Work of McKim, Mead and White, 1879-1915, New York: The Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1915, Vol. I., plate 14.  
Moore, Charles, The Life and Times of Charles Follen McKim, Boston: Houghton, 1929.
3. Likely sources not yet investigated:  
Office records of McKim, Mead, and White.  
Commodore William Edgar family papers.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This is an important design by McKim, Mead, and White, marking the beginning of a return to more academic principles of design for domestic architecture.
2. Condition of fabric: The exterior is in good condition. The interior is divided into apartments.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: About 70 feet by 60 feet; irregular layout; 2-1/2 stories.
2. Foundations: The foundations are of stone.
3. Wall construction: The exterior walls are of "Roman" brick.
4. Structural system: The structure is of masonry.
5. Chimneys: Two large brick chimneys, which are symmetrically placed in relation to the entrance, are composed of paired stacks joined together by arches at the roof peak.

6. Openings:

- a. Doorways: The central entrance located in a porch under a Palladian window is framed by a round bay on the right and a square bay on the left. Thus a symmetrical center composition is given to an otherwise irregular plan.
- b. Windows: Most windows are double hung, with eight-light sashes over four-light sashes. Round arched windows are on the second-floor main facade. Window groupings on the south face the garden.

7. Roof: The hipped roof with a modillion cornice and gabled dormers is shingled.

8. Porches, stoops, and bulkheads: A one-story entrance porch with Ionic columns faces north. An open loggia with Roman Doric columns is located on the second-floor over the west wing. A one-story porch with Ionic columns faces south toward the garden.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The central entrance vestibule leads to a large hall through the center of the house from which open four principal areas: stairhall to the northeast, living room to the northwest, dining room to the southeast, and library to the southwest. The kitchen and service wing extend from the dining room; the ballroom or drawing room wing extends from the living room. Bedrooms, on the second and third floors, are now divided into apartments.
2. Stairways: The open well circular stairway has slender turned metal balusters, an upholstered rail, and open string stairs. Other stairways are in both east and west wings.
3. Flooring: The hall is tiled. There are hardwood floors throughout the rest of the house.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The principal rooms have dark oak panelling with some panelled and beamed ceilings. There are plaster walls and ceilings with cornices elsewhere. The elaborately painted walls and ceiling in the ballroom are in ruinous condition.
5. Doorways and doors: The oak panelled doors are set in molded doorways.



6. Special decorative features: Careful attention was given to wall panelling and woodwork and to the selection of the marble for the fireplaces.

7. Hardware: None of note.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house faces north on a large level lot in a residential area.
2. Historic landscape design: The landscaping is informal, with curved drives leading to the entrance on the north and an opening to a deep garden on the south.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

Newport HABS Project -- 1969. Sponsored in cooperation with the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, Antoinette F. Downing, Chairman. Under the direction of James C. Massey, Chief of HABS, and Osmund Overby, (University of Missouri), Project Supervisor, Jack E. Boucher, photographer.